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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KPAO](#) [KMPI](#) [KDEM](#) [TS](#)
SUBJECT: TUNISIAN ASSOCIATION OF DEMOCRATIC WOMEN ON GOT
INTERFERENCE, DANGER OF ISLAMISTS

REF: A. TUNIS 224

[1](#)B. 05 TUNIS 2550

Classified By: Ambassador William Hudson for Reasons 1.4 b & d

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: On February 9, Poloffs met with senior officials of the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women (ATFD), an authorized and independent NGO active in debating and publicizing women's issues. While focused primarily on social issues, ATFD leaders have at times been outspoken critics of the restriction on political freedoms in Tunisia, and reported to us that the GOT has blocked their meetings, frozen foreign funding and instructed hotels not to rent space to ATFD for public events. ATFD leaders claimed that the Broader Middle East and North Africa (BMENA) initiative appears to be supporting Islamists in the region. The ATFD leadership was strongly anti-Islamist, saying an Islamist government in Tunisia would only "replace one dictatorship with another." End Summary.

[1](#)2. (C) Deputy Pol Counselor and HROff met February 9 with Alhem Belhaj, President, and Hafidha Shkeir, Director of External Operations, for the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women (ATFD). Founded in 1989, ATFD has been active in debating and publicizing women's issues, and operates a counseling center for female victims of domestic violence. ATFD is particularly active in tracking and advocating legislative reform impacting rights of women. ATFD leaders said they feel constrained in advocating full rights for women because of the overall lack of political rights in Tunisia. They claim that due to their independence and critical watch-dog approach to social and political issues in Tunisia, they suffer from interference by the GOT. Belhaj said that the GOT has prevented ATFD awareness campaigns, restricted access to the press, blocked meetings, and instructed hotels not to rent space to ATFD for public events. Belhaj was particularly concerned that the GOT continued to block funding from foreign NGOs, including a U.S. NGO (NFI). Belhaj said that ATFD was looking for Embassy support regarding securing meeting space, unfreezing donor funds, and reiterating our support for freedom of association.

[1](#)3. (C) When asked if ATFD supported the Movement of 18 October, an alliance of disparate opposition political groups and activists demanding freedom of association, expression, and a general amnesty for political prisoners (ref A), Belhaj said that while ATFD supported the Movement's demands, ATFD was strongly against the inclusion of "Islamists" in the alliance, and thus did not support the Movement itself. ATFD had released a statement explaining this position. (NB: Belhaj and Shkeir, like many secular Tunisians, defined "Islamists" broadly, to include anyone supportive of a religious aspect to governance.) Belhaj claimed that even

those who claimed to be moderate Islamists posed a serious threat to Tunisia's significant social progress, and added that should an Islamist government ever take power in Tunisia, it would just "replace one dictatorship with another." They added that any Islamists who say they are democratic or moderate will become authoritarian and seek to limit women's rights after gaining power.

¶4. (C) Belhaj and Shkeir also emphasized their perception that the Broader Middle East and North Africa (BMENA) implies support for a political role for Islamists in the region, and that the USG was seen as lending "dangerous" support to these groups, e.g. the Muslim Brotherhood. Belhaj claimed that this viewpoint was shared by many other Tunisian civil society groups as well. Shkeir cautioned that an alliance similar to the Movement of 18 October between secular and Islamist parties was exploited by Islamists in Iran shortly before the fall of the Shah in 1979. When asked how ATFD reconciled its belief in an open democratic system with its refusal to recognize Islamist groups, Belhaj conceded that Islamist groups could be part of the dialogue, but that they should not be bolstered by support from the U.S. According to Belhaj despite a GOT ban of the Tunisian Islamist party an-Nahdha, support for Islamists remained strong, albeit subdued, in Tunisia. (NB: The extent of any latent Islamic movement in Tunisia is debatable, but Belhaj reflects a fairly widespread concern, certainly shared by the Tunisian leadership, about Islamic strength in the country.)

¶5. (C) Comment: Although ATFD leaders are well-known independent activists, and have been critical of the GOT, the substantive, commendable work of the organization has always been on social issues. The GOT's tactics which have at times prevented the ATFD from carrying out this work differ only in degree from those used to limit the activities of more boldly anti-GOT associations such as the National Council for

Liberty in Tunisia (CNLT) and the International Association for Political Prisoners (AISPP), and attest to the GOT's unwillingness to tolerate any independent organization that does not walk, or at least respect, the party line. End Comment.
HUDSON